PublicEye

By Cara DeGette

A wild ride

It's been a wild week for Colorado Springs.

You've undoubtedly seen all the coverage. First, there was the unfortunate culmination of the very public battle between Focus on the Family and Colorado Sen. **Ken Salazar**, in which the normally sedate Salazar told local TV station KKTV that "Focus is the Antichrist." He later apologized, saying he meant the Colorado Springs-based ministry's political actions over federal judicial nominees is un-Christian and self-serving.

Then there was the recent *Harper's* magazine piece chronicling the rise of Pastor **Ted Haggard** and his New Life Church, a megachurch in northeast Colorado Springs. The author, **Jeff Sharlet**, described Colorado Springs as "unspectacular ... a grid of wide Western avenues lined with squat, gray and beige box buildings." Sharlet's description of our city, with its sprawl and its crime and pollution and a downtown core that "withers into irrelevance," evoked a defensive response in the May 2 *Gazette*, which devoted considerable space to city boosters rebutting Sharlet's observations, point by point.

It's enough to drive a sane man out of town.

Then there was **Julie Rifkin**, a Colorado Springs resident who, after being laid off of her job at the Navigators, a Christian organization, was taken to the hospital after a worried friend called 911. After she was released, Rifkin bought a gun at a pawnshop, murdered her two sons and then took her own life. Her husband Donald, who had been laid off from MCI here in the Springs, had been forced to take another job out of state. The above-mentioned Pastor Ted of New Life Church, which the Rifkins reportedly attended, immediately took center stage, publicly laying blame at Memorial Hospital. If the hospital had not released Rifkin, Haggard charged, the family would be alive today. Haggard's stance brought an outpouring of public scorn, and the pastor ultimately beat a fast retreat. Sometimes, a tragedy is really just a tragedy.

Last weekend brought us the chilly convergence of Christian ideology in the form of a massive (for Colorado Springs) rally at Focus on the Family. Monitored by at least 140 local cops, an estimated 700 Christian gays and lesbians gathered to denounce **James Dobson** and his $122 million political machine for their position that gay people can be cured of a malady that scientists and psychologists have agreed is no illness. For the second time in two months, a handful of relatives of Pastor **Fred Phelps** of the virulently anti-gay (but still Christian) Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, were on hand protesting both Focus on the Family and the Lynchburg, Va.-based Christian organization Soulforce. On Monday, a gay man and his parents were arrested when they trespassed onto the Focus compound, surrounded by photographers hungry for a little action. For its part, Focus closed off its visitors center to visitors, even those of the Christian persuasion, and issued carefully-worded responses maintaining their position that homosexuality is a mental disorder.

And now we hear from the Washington D.C.-based group Americans United for the Separation of Church and State that the **Air Force Academy** in Colorado Springs practices a "pervasive and systemic" bias toward evangelical Christianity that reaches the highest levels of its command structure. No surprise there; but after more than a year of media coverage detailing the same problems, the Air Force this week appointed a special task force to investigate.

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Which brings us to **Rocky Scott**. For the past 16 years, Scott has served as the CEO of the Greater Colorado Springs Economic Development Corporation. The EDC is devoted to creating jobs and enticing new businesses to the city. Back in the early 1990s, this city was in economic despair after its main industry, defense contracting, went south. At the time, Colorado Springs wore the embarrassing moniker as the "foreclosure capital of the country." Scott became the Rocky Balboa of the Colorado Springs job market, in part by enticing "good clean businesses" like Christian nonprofits and high-tech companies to town. With a $4 million relocation incentive from the influential El Pomar Foundation, Focus on the Family agreed to move here from Southern California. Dozens of other Christian groups followed suit, bringing their national and international headquarters to Colorado Springs.

This week, Scott announced his resignation as EDC chairman; he is moving north to work for Loveland-based McWhinney Enterprises, a real estate investment and development firm.

Goodbye, Rocky, and thanks for the legacy. We'll be sure to pray for you.

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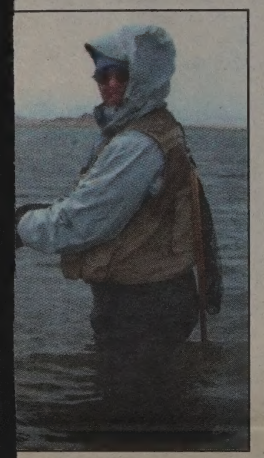

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bite"). The reservoir serves as the drinking water supply for the city of Aurora via a complex 90-mile pipeline system — a thought that made me marvel at man's ingenuity as I returned to the truck from the water's edge and zipped my fly back up.

Moments later we were rigging up our fly-fishing rods and stepping into the rubber waders that would allow us to stand in frigid water up to our behinds hour after hour as the fierce wind drove the snow up our noses.

"God, it's great to be alive!" Susie bellowed, although the wind was really howling and it's possible what she said was, "I'd like to hold your head under the water until you go limp."

A park ranger stopped by just then, rolled down her window and — I am not kidding — said this: "Are you really going out there? Be careful. The wind-chill factor is eight below zero!"

Susie had ducked back inside our vehicle to warm up as the ranger had approached, then stepped back out as the park official drove off.

"What'd she say?" Susie asked.

"She said the trout are really biting," I replied, paraphrasing the ranger's words.

The size of a pea

Dressed in heavy jackets, wool hats and gloves, we waded out into the water and began casting. The fly of choice this day would be a brown streamer tied with rabbit fur and peacock feathers, a fly that, when bumped slowly along the bottom, resembles rabbit fur and peacock feathers with a hook in them.

Trout, however, have brains roughly the size of a pea and believe these flies are crayfish and try to eat them. This tells you that creating artificial fishing flies is a real art form — and also tells you that the average trout could easily serve as a Colorado Springs City Council member.

I taught Susie how to fly-fish a few years ago, hoping she'd embrace the sport as I have since my childhood and that we could share those magical moments when City Councilman Larry Small rises to the fly, opens his mouth, feels the tug of the line and tries to escape by running out into traffic.

Soon a big rainbow trout inhaled Susie's fly and she brought it expertly to the net — a fat, 18-inch trout that fought valiantly but eventually succumbed to the pressure of the fly rod. I helped her unhook the magnificent creature and then, as we do with all of the fish we catch from a river or lake, we carefully released it. We watched in contentment then as it swam back into the depths, a majestic creature now with a sore lip and psychological scars that would haunt it for the rest of its life.

We caught about a dozen big trout on that blustery day, and with the release of each of them I felt a bit of sadness for the fish.

But then, amid the swirling snow and the beauty of the Rocky Mountains, I'd smile and remember the one, single truth that permeates this sport called fly-fishing: Their lips might hurt for a while, but at least the poor dumb fish don't have to play soccer like those odd English kids.

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